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Child welfare workers laud reunited families

Celebration: Week of events honors the rehab of parents who once lost their way

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Armando Aruizu and Maria Rodriguez told their story Thursday about how a Department of Children and Family Services program helped them and their children become a family once again. (Steven Georges/Staff Photographer)



Marlene Bueras holds her 2-year-old son, Federico Sanchez, during Thursday's celebration at the Parkcrest Family Visitation Center in Lakewood. (Steven Georges / Staff Photographer)

Families were reunited at the Department of Children and Family Services Family Reunification Celebration at Parkcrest Church in Lakewood on Thursday.

The event was just one such celebration taking place during "Family Reunification Week." The celebration from March 1 to 7 honors parents who have successfully followed court requirements to be reunited with their children in the home.

It was initiated by Supervisor Gloria Molina, chair of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, after discussions with Michael Nash, presiding judge of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court.

During Thursday's event, several parents who had lost custody of their children because of drug addiction, abuse or alcoholism, spoke of the challenges they endured in order to put their families back together.

"I've been a meth addict for 16 years and to recover has been a journey, a very hard journey," said Jennifer Olague, who lost custody of her children in 2008.

"I struggled a lot with issues that I actually overcame. I had to come back to reality, especially when my kids were taken away."

Because her drug habit kept her in a cloud of confusion, she hardly remembered giving birth to her three children, ages 13, 11 and 8.

"I had to realize I had to take responsibility for those three kids that I actually did have, that I gave birth to," she said. "In my addiction, it was like, 'When did that happen?'"

After going to a treatment facility for several months, where she took parenting, anger management, triggers and relapse prevention classes, she said she finally got it.

"I really just gave it my all. I got to the core, to the bone of my issue in order for me to succeed and take responsibility and to fight for my kids," she said.

Olague's case closed in January 2009, and her children were returned.

Lisa Freeman's drug addiction lost her her children twice.

"My kids were taken away in 2004. I abused my kid, drank, took him from drug home to drug home," she said. During her abusive behavior, Freeman had another child.

"The second time they were taken away was when God helped me find myself," she said. "Now I'm stronger. I have Jesus Christ, who can help me."

In 2007 Freeman graduated from a drug and alcohol rehab center. She has been sober for five years and both her cases are closing soon, one next week and the other in April.

"It means a lot to me (to have my cases closing), because responsibility is what I didn't know. Being a mother was something I didn't know how to do," she said. "I was a lost child since I was 16 and abandoned. A lot of people had doubts and used to judge me at 16. Today, I'm 38, and I love myself and I love my kids and I know how to be a parent and be responsible and I can live a normal life like everybody else. I've got issues every now and then, but I know how to deal with them now."

Keeley Gilmore, a recovering drug addict and alcoholic, will celebrate eight years of sobriety in July.

"I got involved with DCFS from 2001 to 2003. My children were detained and aged out of the system," she said. "At that point I had to go into treatment. I did 18 months."

After she graduated, the facility hired her to be the sober living manager.

"I went to school and became a counselor to give back what I learned, how to stay sober," Gilmore said.

"I've seen how valuable it is for another parent to collaborate with another parent to identify so they don't feel singled out. I took the education I learned from DCFS and my experience with Parents and Partnerships."

Today she works at a child and family agency helping parents.

"I'm doing what I know God wants me to do; helping inspire, support and advocate for our parents."

In addition to celebrating recovery and reunification, attendees praised Parkcrest for opening its doors to house a visitation center, where still-separated parents and children can visit at least once a week.

While families are separated, many visits are in small DCFS offices or in a restaurant with no privacy and no room for any interaction between parent and child, said Michael Brady, a supervising social worker at the south county office of DCFS who runs the family visitation center at Parkcrest.

In an effort to reduce the number of children in foster care, DCFS has increased the prospects for safe reunification by having programs designed to use community-based resources.

Developed in October 2008, the Center is such a resource, where visits are in a nurturing, home-like setting, with couches, nicely painted walls and age-appropriate toys. There is also a kitchen where families can prepare meals together and a courtyard where parents can watch their children play.

"I wish they had had a program like this when I was going through, because I had to do my visitation at McDonald's and the park," said Deirdre Nichols, a former addict, now drug and alcohol counselor at

Tarzana Treatment Center, an outpatient treatment center for men and women in Long Beach.

"Stress is a high motivator for relapse and it's highly stressful when your visits are in an uncomfortable atmosphere. This idea just might help reduce that stress and the likelihood of relapsing," she said.

When accomplishments of sobriety and unity are praised DCFS employees remember why what they do is so important.

"Seeing parents tell their stories about how they got their children back and how social workers helped them reminds social workers why we got into the field in the first place," said Neil Zanville of DCFS Public Affairs.

For more information on the Visitation Center call 562-497-3576. Parents can request information regarding use of the Center from their individual counselors or social worker.

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